

A PRIMER OF WRITING SKILLS 英语写作技巧入门

李美玲 编著



中山大学出版社

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·广州·

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PREFACE

A PRIMER OF WRITING SKILLS has been compiled to suit the needs of students with little basic understanding of the functions of the English language. A product of several years' teaching of writing at the basic level of the English major section, it is fundamentally designed to help both majors and non-majors become more familiar with the structure of English sentences, the English thought development patterns, and the written expression of ideas. It is also intended to give students adequate guidance and practice in applying what they learn from reading, while developing their own way of thinking. For this reason, students are advised to think in English as much as possible when putting their ideas down on paper, and to pay attention to grammatical structure from the very beginning of this course.

Starting from the most basic forms of written expression, the content of this book provides a step-by-step theoretical and linguistic understanding of writing as regards structural and stylistic techniques. The first two chapters, with emphasis on structure and organization, may be covered in one semester. Chapter Three focuses on the most essential part of any writing course—development and expression—and together with Chapter Four forms the framework for another term's work in composition and practical writing. The former gives basic guidance on the organization and writing of college essays for different purposes, while the latter treats of the more

practical skills in notetaking, summary writing, and the writing of casual and formal correspondence. Chapter Five can help more advanced students give full play to their writing skills as regards tone and diction, while Chapter Six may serve as a handbook dealing with problems common to students of English in China. By the end of this course, students should have become more efficient in the use of the language to express their thoughts, or more specifically, in their handling of linguistic patterns of expression in both formal and informal style—a level corresponding with the requirements of the National Band Four Test.

With the help of dictionaries and library reference books, students are especially encouraged to make full use of the many illustrative passages in each chapter, to prepare for their assignments, expand their background knowledge, and improve their application skills in the foreign language. The self-tests provided in each chapter should afford them some practice in structural techniques, stylistic analysis, and feedback composition.

As a rule, classes can meet for two hours each week, with one period devoted to lecture and assessment of feedback work, and the other period, to testing or classroom practice with individual coaching or group work.

Practice with the teacher's help is indeed by far the best way to learn to write well. Without such practice, no book on writing can really achieve its purpose. Thus the sole aim of this book is to help students practice; it is a means to an end—to help them become more at ease with the structure of the foreign language, knowing the differences between it and their mother tongue, and gradually developing the ability to think in the foreign language and to use it

efficiently in the written expression of their thoughts.

For this reason, I gratefully acknowledge my debt to the foreign and Chinese scholars whose enlightening coursebooks and handbooks have been the necessary sources of most of the specimen passages and test questions in this book. My thanks are implicit on every page on which their work appears.

Furthermore, I must acknowledge with my deepest gratitude the special attention and guidance of all my superiors, Professor Gou Shi-quan, Professor Hsiao Jie-wen, and Professor Lin Ze-quan in particular, and I am especially grateful to our esteemed Professor Wang Zhong-yan for his warm encouragement. Finally, I must make special mention of and give thanks for the fine cooperation of my students, without whom this book could not have been written, and all those who helped with the tedious, typing and publication work. I should also welcome all criticism of anything short of merit in this book, though it is my chief desire that real achievement lie not in the book itself but in the work of its readers.

September, 1995

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CHAPTER ONE

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

I

Basic Parts of Sentences

In English prose writing, a sentence consists mainly of a SUBJECT and a PREDICATE, of which the most important element is the predicate verb. Beginners should first learn to check sentences to see whether they have this essential or basic pattern of an English sentence.

1. The Subject and the Predicate

A written sentence is incomplete without the two main elements—the subject and the predicate—unlike some other languages such as Spanish and Chinese, where the subject is understood in the verb form or the verb is entirely unnecessary according to contextual meaning. For example, in Spanish, “No sabe nada” in a certain context will mean “(You/He/She) know (s) nothing”; and in Chinese, “他个子很高” and “下雨了” mean “He (is) tall” and “(It) has begun to rain” respectively.

The SUBJECT, usually called a noun phrase, is made up of a noun, a pronoun, or a verbal noun. As a noun, it is usually preceded by a determiner or article (a, the, this, etc.), e.g. a boy, the building, this book, those students, etc. Sometimes, when the

meaning is taken in an indefinite sense, the subject noun in its plural form (with “-s” or “-es”) is a single word, e.g. Boys, Buildings, Books, Students, etc.. The subject or noun phrase may be compound, that is, when it consists of two or three nouns (or pronouns) linked together by “and” or “or”. It may also be more complete in meaning with an adjective, a noun (or verbal) modifier, or a prepositional phrase modifier:

Many rich peasant families in China now have motorcycles, not to mention TV sets and washers.
(deter.) (adj.) (n. modif.) (sub.) (phr. modif.)

Much the same can be said of the PREDICATE. A sentence usually has a single predicate or verb phrase, which is a simple verb phrase together with an auxiliary or modal verb. The verb phrase with an adverb, a phrase modifier, an object or complement, is a complete verb phrase. Two or more verb phrases functioning together with the same subject (but independent of one another in meaning and form) make up a compound predicate:

Gold glitters. (Simple)

The little boy jumped for joy. (Complete with phr. modifier)

If he lives to be eighty, he will see the year 2000. (Complete with object)

The teacher walked briskly into the classroom, a big dictionary under his arm. (Complete with adverb and phr. modifier)

He set down his suitcase and knocked on the door. (Compound predicate)

2. The Sentence Fragments

A written sentence is usually an independent clause (with a

subject and a predicate), complete in meaning as well as in structure. A phrase, or a clause dependent on the idea in another clause (the main clause) is only a sentence fragment, such as “last year” (adv. phrase), or “when the Queen went to Ireland” (adv. clause).

Each of the above sentence fragments does not give us full information. It is only part of a sentence and should not begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop (period) as a sentence does. Sentence fragments, which are common in speech, are NOT acceptable in college writing. Thus students must always be careful not to mistake a phrase or a dependent clause for a complete sentence. It is necessary, therefore, to recognize the structural differences between a complete independent clause and a dependent clause or phrase:

Fragment A: Last year

Fragment B: When the Queen went to Ireland

Sentence: The Queen went to Ireland last year.

Or: When the Queen went to Ireland last year, the police were determined to ensure her safety.

Fragment A has no subject or predicate. Though fragment B has a subject and a predicate, it begins with a subordinating adverb (cf, because, while, since, whereas, although, though, etc.), which indicates it is a subordinate, not independent, clause; the subordinate or dependent clause does not make sense until it is connected to the main clause “the police were determined to ensure her safety”.

II

Kinds of Sentences in Prose Writing

English sentences vary much in structure and usage. As in all other languages, they are like bricks, stones, metal, etc. put together to shape ideas in different styles.

1. Declarative, Interrogative, Imperative and Exclamatory Sentences

According to their usage, there are four kinds of English sentences:

A **DECLARATIVE SENTENCE** makes an assertion or a statement:

Birds are beautiful.

An **INTERROGATIVE SENTENCE** asks a question:

Who was chosen to represent our group?

An **IMPERATIVE SENTENCE** expresses a command or a request:

Meet me in Shenzhen at Shekou Wharf.

An **EXCLAMATORY SENTENCE** expresses a strong feeling or emotion, such as surprise, joy, anger, pain, etc.:

How careless you are !

Each of the above examples is a complete, simple sentence, with one subject and one predicate. (The imperative sentence is somewhat exceptional, with the pronoun YOU as the subject understood and therefore omitted.)

2. Simple, Compound, Complex, and Compound-Complex Sentences

According to their structure and function, particularly in prose writing, English sentences are divided into four kinds:

(1) *The Simple Sentence*

The simple sentence is a complete, independent clause with subject (single or compound) and predicate (single or compound). It is usually short and emphatic to show important facts, main points, or conclusions. It can also describe a rapid movement or convey a feeling of excitement in narrative and descriptive writing. Look at the following examples:

Manuel Garcia climbed the stairs to Don Miguel Retana's office. He set down his suitcase and knocked on the door. There was no answer. Manuel, standing in the hallway, felt there was someone in the room. He felt it through the door...

—Ernest Hemingway

Foolish people in easy circumstances flatter themselves that there is no such thing as the class war in the British Empire, where we are all far too respectable and too well protected by our parliamentary system to have any vulgar unpleasantness of that sort. They deceive themselves. We are up to the neck in the class war.

—George Bernard Shaw

In the first example, we see Hemingway's style in his objective presentation of events, which he describes in their sequence of

occurrence. The reader is to see for himself what is happening and draw his own conclusions. In the second example the two simple sentences at the end express the author's conclusions.

A simple sentence is not necessarily a short one, it may contain some phrases:

Hundreds of dusty arrowheads and spearpoints were lying on the shelves in his study.

The two most important kinds of phrases in prose writing are prepositional phrases and verbal phrases.

1) The Prepositional Phrase

In speech as well as in writing, prepositions are the most useful words to help you form your ideas and to relate them to one another. The most common simple prepositions are "of", "to", "for", "at", "in", "on", "from", "with", "by", and "as"; others like "after", "before", "over", "under", "through", "until", and "without", together with the more complex ones, such as "according to", "rather than", "except for", "contrary to", "because of", "in addition to", etc. are quite useful in writing. When writing your first draft, you may have used a clause which makes your sentence too long or prevents the reader from understanding your main idea. In this case, a PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE is the best option for improving the effect. It can function as an adjective or as an adverb:

Flowers of many kinds grow on river banks.
(adj.) (adv.)

2) The Verbal Phrase

A verbal phrase is also a very useful structure for improving

your writing skills. It may be one of these four kinds:

① A gerund phrase, which functions as a noun (subject or object of the predicate), e.g.

Shoeing horses requires care.

② A participial phrase, which may function as an adjective or as an adverb, e.g.

There are tens of thousands of overseas Chinese
visiting their home country every year.
(adj.)

Jumping aside, he dodged the ball.
(adv.)

③ An infinitive phrase, beginning with “to” and used as a noun, an adjective, or an adverb:

To win the game was all he could think of.
(n.)

Charlotte's Web is a good book to read to a child.
(adj.)

The child was eager to listen to the story
(adv.)

④ An absolute phrase construction, which is like a participial phrase but with a different subject. It is sometimes used instead of an adverb clause of time introduced by “when” or “while”, in order to express the action of different subjects at the same moment or within the same period of time for better effect:

The portrait having dried, the artist hung it on the wall.

(2) *The Compound Sentence*

The compound sentence is made up of two or more simple sentences closely related in thought, as an orderly sequence of ideas which are equal or nearly equal in importance. This relation is often

called coordination, and is indicated by the use of the comma and a coordinator like "and", "but", "for", "so", "or", and "yet", or sometimes by the use of the semicolon and a conjunctive adverb (such as "however", "moreover", "therefore", "similarly", "furthermore", "nevertheless", "still", "anyhow", "instead", "otherwise", "meanwhile", "then", "hence", "thus", "accordingly", "indeed", etc.) or a phrasal modifier such as "in this case", "as a result", "in fact", "as a matter of fact", "for one thing", "in the first place", "for example", "on the other hand", "above all", "in addition", "in contrast", and "in conclusion", etc.). Conjunctive adverbs and phrasal modifiers are always used as transitions and always separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma (except for "then"). They may be preceded by either a semi-colon or full stop. Study these examples of coordination:

The Columbia Phonograph Broadcasting Company sold for \$ 400 000 in 1928, but its annual sales now approach \$ 1 billion.

The rare book had a torn flyleaf. Therefore, it was advertised at a reduced price.

A specialist from the museum arrived and asked to examine it; then all the family became excited. The painting was valuable; in fact, the museum offered ten thousand dollars for it.

Compound sentences are loose sentences which the writer uses for an easy, natural, and informal presentation of ideas, or for listing facts or ideas of equal importance. Simple coordination with "and" or "but" is more common in speech than in writing, however. In any writing situation, it is best to make wise choices. Otherwise, too much simplicity will tend to make your writing less serious, and sometimes even innocent and childlike.

(3) *The Complex Sentence*

The complex sentence is made up of an independent clause expressing the main idea, and one or more subordinate (dependent) clauses expressing less important ideas (see Subordination III. 1).

Any simple sentence can be made into a subordinate clause (or modifying phrase) as long as its meaning can be linked in some logical way to the meaning of another sentence. Sometimes, either one or the other of two simple sentences can be subordinated; in this case, the choice must be guided by your purpose. For example:

The students were protesting.

The lecture was cancelled.

They can be written as a complex sentence:

The students were protesting because the lecture was cancelled. /
(main idea)

The lecture was cancelled because the students were protesting.
(main idea)

(4) *The Compound-Complex Sentence*

The compound-complex sentence consists of two or more main clauses, and at least one subordinate clause:

When heavy rains come, the streams rise, and farmers know that there will be floods.

Since structure is only a means to an end—to express meaning clearly—choice of sentence structure depends both on the subject matter you are dealing with and on the context of a sentence within a paragraph. The need for subordination of less important details in